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FDA's recommended daily allowances are derived mainly from the extensive nutrition data published by the Food and Nutrition Board of the National Academy of Sciences-National Research Council. (The publication of recommended dietary allowances by the National Academy began in 1943, primarily as a World War II planning guide for the general population and military services.) Based on extensive review of current research and knowledge in the nutrition field, the National Academy issues what is known as recommended dietary allowances for a wide variety of age and sex groups in the general population (26 groups were listed in the academy's 1968 report).

In contrast, FDA's recommended daily allowances apply to four general population groups. These are: for infants up to 1 year; for children (junior foods) under 4; for individuals 4 and older (most food products are based on these allowances); and for pregnant or lactating women.

Both the academy's and FDA's dietary recommendations represent the amounts of essential nutrients considered adequate to meet the known nutritional needs of most healthy persons in the United States. They do not, however, take into account the special needs of people required to follow special diets because they are ill or suffering from other medical disorders that require professionally supervised diets.

FDA's allowances are based generally on the highest values recommended in the National Academy's findings. For that reason, many normal, healthy people would not necessarily have to consume 100 percent of the U.S. RDA of a given nutrient each day. Also, although they are called "daily" allowances, the recommended nutrient levels do not have to be met religiously each day. The body is able to store some nutrients for later use and can endure lower-than-required intakes for short periods without harm. Therefore, the dietary recommendations can be met by diets that fulfill the nutrient requirements over a five- to eight-day period.

For most Americans, the most readily available source of nutrient information is the nutrition label that appears on many food products.

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(Updated April 1985)

REPRINTED FROM NOVEMBER 1982

HHS Publication No. (FDA) 85-2168

FDA CONSUMER

GPO 917-224

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES
Public Health Service
Food and Drug Administration
5600 Fishers Lane
Rockville, Md. 20857
Office of Public Affairs

HE 20.4010/a:

RDAs: Key To Nutrition

by Chris Lecos

How can a consumer make sensible food choices to provide nutritious meals for the family when bombarded daily with messages, claims and advice about which foods to buy and confronted with the bewildering stock of foods on supermarket shelves?

It isn't always easy. A conscientious food shopper must do some planning to choose foods with the nutrients essential to good health.

For most Americans, the most readily available source of nutrient information is the nutrition label that appears on many food products. The Food and Drug Administration created the nutrition label in 1973 to make it easier for shoppers to compare food brands and their nutrient content. Studies show that up to 73 percent of consumers say they use the labels for nutrition information. Until something better is devised, it is still one of the most reliable aids available.

The label includes two important areas of information for the consumer. One discloses the number of calories in a specified serving of a food along with the amount—expressed in grams (there are approximately 28 grams in an ounce)—of protein, carbohydrate, fat and, as of Jan. 1, 1986, sodium. The other, under the heading "Percentage of Recommended Daily Allowances" (U.S. RDA), tells the consumer the approximate amounts of certain essential vitamins and minerals contained in a serving. These amounts are expressed as percentages.

Both the academy's and FDA's dietary recommendations represent the amounts of essential nutrients considered adequate to meet the known nutritional needs of most healthy persons in the United States.

FDA established recommended daily allowances for protein and 19 vitamins and minerals in its 1973 regulations. However, under the regulations, percentages in a serving are required only for protein, five vitamins (vitamins A and C, thiamine, riboflavin and niacin) and two minerals (calcium and iron). A manufacturer has the option of listing the remaining 12 vitamins and minerals, vitamin D, vitamin E, vitamin B_6, folic acid, vitamin B_{12}, phosphorus, iodine, magnesium, zinc, copper, biotin and pantothenic acid.

FDA first announced its proposals for nutrition labeling of foods in 1972. One writer described the effort as "one of the most ambitious programs" the agency had ever undertaken, in which government, the food industry, nutrition experts and consumers all played an active role.

More than 3,000 responded to FDA's proposals in 1972. Final regulations, published the following year, spelled out federal requirements for nutrition labeling. Under these regulations, any food to which a nutrient is added or for which a nutrition claim is made must have a nutrition label. Recent FDA studies show that nearly half of the packaged food sales in the United States involve products with nutrition labeling. About one-third of these bear the labeling because the producers are required to do so and about two-thirds because the manufacturers choose to include the information on their products.